

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

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## Face of Philanthropy

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### **A Book-Lover's Charity Builds Libraries for Indonesian Kids**



*Photograph by Sabine Lehmann*

*By Jane Coaston*

On a trip to Indonesia's East Java province three years ago, James Owens, a University of Southern California assistant professor, was struck by the many problems faced by the region, where mudslides are frequently caused by natural-gas drilling. More than 10,000 people have been forced out of their homes because of the slides.

While he couldn't solve many of the basic problems he encountered, he realized he could help the region cope with one problem.

"The schools I visited didn't have any books for children to read for pleasure," recalls Mr. Owens, who teaches business-school students the communications skills they will need as managers.

Mr. Owens has thought a lot about what reading for pleasure means. He spent 10 years asking prominent celebrities such as Liam Neeson and Queen Noor to discuss the books that meant the most to them. The result is a manuscript he called *The World Is Just a Book Away*, which eventually became the name of a charity he created to bring books to Indonesians.

In 2009 he began soliciting donations to build a few libraries in the towns that had been

struck by the devastating mudslides. He started the “20/20 Club” on Facebook, with members pledging \$20 each to buy 20 books.

Within the first year, his organization built 22 libraries: 21 in Sidoarjo, a region of East Java, and one in Bali. Because many schools didn’t have room for their own libraries, the charity also started a mobile library that now serves 6,000 students at 28 schools.

Mr. Owens says his group takes care to listen to the needs and desires of the Indonesian residents his charity serves. The organization held sessions with students, parents, teachers, and others who live in communities where the charity built libraries, and also gave them power to decide which books would be available.

“After our initial launches,” Mr. Owens says, “we decided that the community knows their community best.”

Residents of each community form committees to work with the charity’s project managers, and some communities also commit to raising 10 percent of the funds needed to build the library. The rest of the charity’s money comes from individuals and some philanthropic organizations, including Alumni USC Indonesia. Mr. Owens covers his charity’s administrative costs himself with assistance from a few board members. Over the past two years, The World Is Just a Book Away has raised about \$200,000.

Arezo Yassai, who graduated from the University of Southern California business school last year, learned about the charity while taking a communications class with Mr. Owens. As a class project, she wrote a marketing plan for the organization, and Mr. Owens asked her if she would devote more time to the charity. In October she took her first trip to Indonesia to help open libraries, staying for about three weeks and visiting Bali, Jakarta, Padang, and Sidoarjo.

“I’d never seen the joy of children in this way,” Ms. Yassai says.

Though she has now left the charity to help run a family business, she still champions Mr. Owens’s cause. “I want to get as many people as possible to come and open libraries,” she says. “After they cut that ribbon, their life won’t be the same.”